

Google should be listening to Microsoft - and that's not as crazy as it sounds!

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Every day, nearly 100 million people have been logging onto Microsoft Teams, the communication and collaboration platform. Many of them believe they are experiencing tomorrow's workplace, but Microsoft executives are scratching their heads behind the scenes. This worldwide epiphany is something they had already experienced.

However, that Microsoft epiphany, four years before, was profoundly different - not only in terms of magnitude, but also qualitatively different.

By now you know the new, pandemic-world drill, in which commuting means shuffling from the bathroom to your living room (if you're among the lucky ones) or your bedroom (if you're a bit less fortunate).



Some of you love it. At least, that's what PayPal's internal numbers claim, with some 45% of their staff saying they would prefer to continue working from home.

But others absolutely dread it.

Ironically, those who hate it the most tended to crave it prior to the onslaught of COVID-19.

The millennials, having lost contact with their peers, now seem to be the biggest opponents of all.

We might trick ourselves into believing the world will quickly revert to 100% normal - whatever "normal" is - but mark my words: It won't. And it won't, for far less straightforward reasons than you might imagine.

The CEO of one of the large worldwide pharma players summed it up very elegantly during a conversation I had with him last week: "My entire workforce has been off the road for nearly three months, and not only did it work perfectly fine, but we've also zeroed our flight costs, taxis, per diem, and hotels. Now, we're questioning our need for offices, rent, electricity, catered food, security..."

This company is far from alone. A lineup of major corporations, from American Express to CITI, is seriously considering permanently replacing office space with home offices.

Google recently awarded a \$1,000 payment to all Googlers, helping them set up proper home offices and TV studio environments in their bedrooms. In the best Google style, Google employees immediately began submitting "10-ways-to-get-the-most-value-out-of-your-\$1000"

posts. At the same time, hundreds of different Google logo home designs began to appear behind the Googlers. Judging from their internal promo videos, they loved it! Problem solved. Right?

Except, as Microsoft discovered four years ago, another problem reared its head. With all this distancing, corporate culture vanished.

If I'd written this sentence back in the Steve Balmer days, you would have laughed and said, "Something that doesn't exist can't disappear." But Satya Nadella, Microsoft's third CEO, has introduced a culture so strong that you'd be hard-pressed to find opponents inside the organization. Nadella's solution to the previous, stagnant culture was to do what Google had done for years. He created a thriving, engaging, cross-functional office environment that made employees want to hang around, even after 5 pm.



In the meantime, due to COVID-19, Google has begun doing almost the exact opposite. They've introduced obligatory six-foot distancing, imposed one-way walk lanes, and eliminated all the fun, bells, and whistles. Little by little, they've replaced it all with super-high-tech home offices. Google's offices have shut down for 90% of their employees, for the rest of the year.

I think it's fair to say that many of the business world's most visionary leaders, prior to COVID-19, had reached the conclusion that a powerful corporate culture is essential to every organization's success.

Though coming from many different angles, they'd realized the inextricable connections among employee happiness, retention rate, and customer happiness.
Here's the common formula: Happy employee = happy customer.

And then, suddenly, it all stopped.

Everything changed.

And here's the uncomfortable part. Working from home is not for everyone.

It's not just a matter of "Oh, you'll get used to it, you'll come to see how great it is." That argument is far too simple. There's a lot more at stake than just cramped space and multi-functional rooms.

Putting on my psychologist's hat for a second: Our working environment has deep roots in our hardwired tribal mindset. The corporate office has largely defined our personality and identity. Today, many of us define who we are through our professional occupations, not just the title on the business card but, perhaps even more important, that logo in the card's upper right corner.

Without that logo: No identity.

Disconnected from the logo and the office, some working people - perhaps even most - face an existential crisis. They're risking the loss of their very identity.

A powerful culture is all about establishing a true sense of belonging. But when we're all connecting by remote control, how on earth do we accomplish, create, and maintain this sense of belonging?

Naturally, I have some thoughts on the matter, but please be warned: They're not what you might expect.

Join me again next week - and if you have ideas for building cultures online, please share them with me before I roll out the big reveal...